DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 297 885 PS 017 529

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TITLE Early Peer Relations: Developmental Significance and Prognostic Implications.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Mental Health (DHHS), Bethesda, Md.
PUB DATE 88
GRANT NIMH-R01-MH-42888
NOTE 23p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aggression; *Antisocial Behavior; Family Relationship; Friendship; *High Risk Students; *Individual Development; Literature Reviews; Mental Health; Models; *Peer Relationship; *Predictor Variables; Rejection (Psychology); Research Methodology; Research Problems; Risk; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS Shyness

ABSTRACT

Considered are the developmental and prognostic implications of early peer relations. Evidence concerning peer difficulties as risk factors is reviewed along with research dealing with family relations and peer relations in social development. In preference to a stepping-stone model of the development of social deviance, a conjunctive feedback model is advanced to account for the manner in which troubled family relations are followed by troubled peer relations, problems with self-regard, narrowed alternatives in choosing friends, and manifestations of social deviance. It is argued that the origins of these conjunctive cycles appear in early childhood, and therefore require attention in program design and management for young children. (RH)

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Early Peer Relations: Developmental Significance and Prognostic Implications

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PS 018202

Running head: Early peer relations

This manuscript was completed with financial support provided by research grant RO1 MH 42888, National Institute of Mental Health.
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Abstract

The developmental and prognostic implications of early peer relations are considered. Evidence concerning peer difficulties as risk factors is reviewed along with research dealing with family relations and peer relations in social development. A conjunctive model is advanced to account for the manner in which troubled family relations are followed by troubled peer relations, problems with self-regard, narrowed alternatives in choosing friends, and manifestations of social deviance. The origins of these conjunctive cycles appear to exist in early childhood, hence requiring attention in program design and management for young children.

Early Peer Relations: Developmental Significance and Prognositic Implications

The family has been regarded as the preeminent socialization context because the child's earliest experiences occur within it and more time is consumed in family interaction than in interaction with other socializing agents. Family relationships are usually considered to be the well-springs of social competence and most theories of personality development attribute effectiveness and success in later functioning to the formation of smooth-running and secure relationships in family experience. Similarly, deviance and debilitation in adolescence and adulthood are thought to have their roots in insecure relationships within the family and inadequate socialization within it.

There is much evidence showing that, indeed, troubled children are likely to have troubled family relations. A substantial correlation exists between the number of symptoms presented by children and the cohesiveness and structure existing within the family (Smets & Hartup, 1988). Without a doubt, chaotic and unstructured family relations give rise to childhood difficulties. But this model of social development is simplistic. Extensions and elaborations of childhood difficulties occur outside the family and involve experience with many other individuals. These experiences also contribute unique variance to the development of social competence, on the one hand, and the development of deviance or inadequate coping, on the other.

This review has two objectives: First, some of the contributions

to development made by children's relations with other children are delineated. Second, current thinking about the interrelations between family socialization and peer socialization is summarized, especially in relation to the growth of social competence and the development of deviance.

The Nature of Peer Relations

To most of us, children's relations with other children seem essentially to be luxuries in human development. Both parents and professionals tend to be disinterested in these relationships unless they result in bloody noses or chronic friendlessness. When we ask our children where they're going ("out") or what they're going to do ("nothing"), their replies usually don't bring more than a shrug. Only if real trouble ensues do we become concerned about children's experiences with other children. By and large, it is a world that adults don't think much about except for occasional worries about the trouble-making that everyone knows goes on there.

This is not a correct view of the peer culture. Considerable evidence suggests that peer relations contribute positively to mental health, both in childhood and later on (Hartup, 1983; Parker & Asher, 1987). The elements in child-child relations believed to be responsible for these contributions are the developmental equivalence of children and their companions, and the egalitarian nature of their interaction. Child-child relationships are 'horizontal' in contrast to adult-child relations, which are organized hierarchically. Recent research makes clear that the challenges confronted by a child when interacting with another immature individual differ substantially from the challenges presented by adults. Being older and wiser, adults can 'drive' their interactions with children and, indeed, observations

show that these relationships are largely defined by issues of control and compliance. In contrast, issues of equity and reciprocity define the child's relations with other children, beginning in toddlerhood (Youniss, 1980). Peer interaction may sometimes be marked by dominance and submission, but children's relationships with one another are egalitarian to a much greater extent than their relationships with adults.

Most authorities regard egalitarian experience as essential for expanding the child's construction of reality to include cooperation and the understanding that social contracts are obligations whicah are mutually generated (Piaget, 1932). Being egalitarian does not mean that these relationships are always harmonious; the give-and-take in child-child relations actually involves more aggression and disagreement than occurs in interaction with adults. Moreover, conflict occurs more frequently between children and their friends than between classmates who are not friends (see below). Most theorists have argued, however, that the conflicts experienced in interactions with other children present unique challenges <u>because</u> the antagonists are both immature, and that their resolution leaves a special residue for precisely the same reason. The argument goes something like this: the child doesn't change his or her basic understanding of the world through confrontations with adults. Changes that result from these encounters are, inevitably, changes of conformity or compliance. Only through resolving conflicts with one's agemates does a true understanding emerge of social relations and the manner in which social rules govern our lives.

Parent-child and child-child relations are functionally

dissimilar beginning in the child's earliest experience. Parent-child relations consist initially of care-giving and succorance, and this continues throughout the first decade even though the nature of caregiving changes. Child-child interaction consists mainly of play and socializing (which includes both aggressive and non-aggressive exchanges). The major developmental task of the first two years seems to be the construction of focussed relationships with adults, not the construction of relationships with other children. One of the most striking changes to occur toward the end of the second year of life is the emergence of contingencies in child-child interaction that involve sustained attention, imitation, role relations ('chaser'and 'chased'), and cooperation (Eckerman, Davis, & Didow, 1988). This developmental timetable is universal. These developments do not mean every toddler needs early educational experience, but they explain why few societies formally provide peer experience for children until the end of the second year --with the exception of sibling caretaking.

The word 'friend' appears in children's vocabularies quite early, usually by the fourth year, although most young children cannot articulate the mutuality and commitment that are the hallmarks of these relationships as we know them. Observational studies demonstrate that friendships provide children with social experiences that are unique, and that may well have important developmental implications. Close relationships with adults do not provide children with the mutuality, affective sharing, and experience in conflict resolution that friendships do. For example, recent work shows that friendship relations have a special role in conflict management (Hartup, Laursen, Stewart, & Eastenson, 1988). We observed four-year olds for a period of 10 weeks, identifying those who were friends by

means of both sociometric interviews and observations. At the same time, we accumulated observations of disagreements occuring among the children, separating those that occurred between mutual friends, unilateral associates (i.e., unreciprocated attractions), and nonfriends. Examining the frequencies with which these disagreements occurred, we discovered that rates of disagreements between nonfriends were slightly greater than between friends but, since children spend more time with their friends than with nonfriends, most actually experience more conflicts with friends than with other children. Most important, there were significant differences in the nature of conflict resolutions occurring between friends and between nonfriends. Although friends and nonfriends did not disagree about different issues, friends' conflicts were more likely to involve negotiation than the conflicts of nonfriends, were less heated, were more likely to end in compromise, and were more likely to be followed by continued interaction. The conflicts between unilateral associates resembled the conflicts of nonfriends more closely than the conflicts of mutual friends, although interaction between unilateral associates was more likely to continue after the conflict had been resolved than was the case with nonfriends.

Together with other evidence that shows children's interactions with their friends to be different from their interactions with nonfriends in terms of emotional expression, attention to equity considerations, mutuality, and sharing (e.g., Newcomb & Brady, 1982), it is clear that these relationships are not only prized by children, but provide them with socialization experiences that no other relationships can. Within them, the child has an opportunity to cope

with both prosocial demands (i.e., demands for cooperation and intimacy) as well as conflict and competition. Moreover, these issues must be dealt with in ways that will permit the child's relationships to continue.

These arguments suggest that the child without friends is a child at risk in social and emotional development. Longitudinal evidence on this matter is not as extensive as longitudinal evidence on the importance of social acceptance generally (to which we turn our attention momentarily). But the literature shows again and again that children with friends are more socially competent than children without friends, and that troubled children commonly have difficulties in forming and maintaining these relationships (Rutter & Garmezy, 1983). It is difficult to sort out whether the child's capacity for successfully forming and maintaining friendships is (a) a nonessential 'by-product' of more fundamental competencies that predict future adjustment directly, or (b) crucial because friendships provide unique and necessary opportunities for the development of certain relevant abilities. Still a third possibility is that friendship experience may not be strictly necessary for healthy adaptation but merely an expedient means to that end. Whatever the case, though, friends are developmental advantages and clear markers, in their absence or instability, of developmental risk.

Peer Relations and Risk

Striking individual differences are evident in the extent to which young children are accepted or rejected by their peers. Some children are well-regarded by nearly everybody; others are nearly universally disliked. Studies suggesting a link between problematic childhood peer relations and adult maladjustment have accumulated

slowly, but the evidence now is compelling. As demonstrated in a substantial number of retrospective and prospective investigations, psychologically troubled individuals have histories of poor peer relations extending back to early and middle childhood (Parker & Asher, 1987). Depending on the type of follow-back analysis, there is nearly universal demonstration that maladjusted adults are more likely to have had peer difficulties in childhood than their better-adjusted contemporaries. These life histories show the relevant difficulties to involve being disliked (rejection), being aggressive, and being shy/withdrawn. Between 30% and 70% of disordered adults in these studies showed a history of problematic peer relations as compared to 10% to 15% among control cases. Follow-back studies, of course, only indicate the extent to which difficulties with peer relations characterize the histories of older maladjusted individuals. They do not demonstrate the extent to which poor peer relations are predictive of these difficulties. At the moment, though, the literature contains more than 30 prospective studies that also demonstrate a link between peer relations in childhood and problems in later life (see Parker & Asher, 1987). Thus, the evidence strongly suggests that poor peer relations are important factors in the histories of children who are 'at risk' for later difficulties.

This 'risk hypothesis,' however, must be qualified in several respects: First, these studies indicate that predictability varies as a function of the type of peer measure obtained. Social rejection (as determined by sociometric tests or interviews) and aggressiveness are the most consistent predictors of negative outcome. Little evidence connects 'not being liked' consistently with these outcomes and,

especially, shyness/withdrawal in either early or middle childhood has not been demonstrated consistently to place the child at risk (Hartup, 1983; Parker & Asher, 1987). It may be that shyness neither disrupts peer interaction nor peer reputations as extensively as aggressiveness or that it is unstable developmentally. But shyness and withdrawal are also difficult to measure effectively in large scale studies, and longitudinal investigations to date have not included very intensive or systematic assessment of social isolation and withdrawal. One recent investigation (Hymel, Rubin, Rowden, & LeMare, 1988) confirms that shyness is largely independent of sociometric status, both concurrently and across time, although shyness in the second grade does predict an internalizing orientation three years later.

Second, being aggressive and impulsive is closely related to subsequent deviance and is also closely related to being disliked. Being disliked in middle childhood, however, is itself significantly correlated with later criminality in some studies (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1988) but not in others (West & Farrington, 1973). More will be said about this later, but the reader should note that there is a possibility that the link between social rejection and social deviance may be indirect rather than direct.

Third, peer relations assessments of all types show similar errors of prediction, namely, there are few false negative errors but many false positive ones. That is, peer relations problems are very common among children who ultimately exhibit problematic outcomes but, at the same time, indications of peer difficulties over-select many children who are not actually at risk. Research workers are now seeking to improve the long-term predictions that can be made on the

basis of peer difficulties. For example, French (1988) has demonstrated that two distinct sub-types can be identified among disliked elementary school children. Psychological dynamics are relatively clear with one sub-type that accounts for about 50% of the cases: these are children (mostly boys) who are aggressive, impulsive, and disruptive. Other children who are disliked by their peers do not show a clear profile, although they seem to be shy as well as under-controlled, i.e., they exhibit low ego-control. These children may not account for every false positive prediction from peer difficulties, but separating them from aggressive/rejected children should reduce the number of these 'misses' (Kuperschmidt, 1983). Better understanding of the varieties of peer rejection is urgently needed since it has obvious implications for the selection of children who should receive early intervention.

Fourth, the risk premise has received stronger support in relation to outcomes such as school drop-out and criminality than in relation to later psychopathology. One can't be entirely certain about why this is so. One can argue reasonably that the literature dealing with peer relations and psychopathology is not very sophisticated methodologically, thus obscuring these dynamics (Hartup, 1983; Parker & Asher, 1987). But it is also quite possible that peer difficulties are simply more predictive of school drop-out and criminality than of other kinds of mental health outcomes. The developmental antecedents of internalizing disorders have been generally hard to trace, while the developmental course of externalizing difficulties has been somewhat easier. One can hardly be surprised, then, that the documentation of the poor peer relations

--> maladjustment linkage should be more clear-cut in the case of conduct disorder.

Developmental models

Several different developmental scenarios have been constructed to account for the situation described. Two will be described here.

The stepping-stone model. First, the development of social deviance has been thought to follow an essentially direct course, across a series of 'stepping-stones' in peer relations. Beginning in early and middle childhood, or roughly the years between 4 and 8, the unskilled, aggressive, and impulsive child experiences rejection in his or her early interactions with peers. These children then gradually construct a set of attribution biases leading them to attribute hostility to their associates when hostility isn't there (Dodge, 1980), and which generate negative social reputations for these children among their associates. In other words, interpersonal relations are established in which acting-out behavior generates rejection and negative peer expectations are generally confirmed. Extremely high or low self-esteem is also involved (Boivin & Begin, 1988). At the same time, there is relatively little opportunity for these children to engage in socially constructive interactions with other children that would enhance cooperative problem solving, sharing, effective conflict management, communication, and a sense of intimacy. Social skills, then, may be different among these children from among their ordinary associates because they have been cut off from the necessary learning opportunities as well as because they have acquired repertoires of deviant behaviors.

Criminal or delinquent activity is not a very large part of the picture at this time. Although some children engage in criminal

behavior during the early school years, most are delinquents-to-be rather than active criminals. Speaking developmentally, this period appears as a stepping-stone to conduct disorder (Farrington, 1986) rather than a period in which delinquency is "tried out" or "discovered." Being troublesome and disliked appears to be the best way to describe the young child who is at risk for conduct disorder. And, according to work being done in Great Britain, it is indeed this combination of characteristics at age 8 that best predicts criminal activity at age 13; criminal activity at age 8 is not a good predictor, essentially because there is so little of it (Farrington, 1986) .

Progressively, however, the companions available to the aggressive/rejected child are likely to include a disproportionate number of unskilled, unpopular children. Indeed, studies of children's social networks among school-aged children show that aggressive children hang out with other aggressive children (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariepy, 1988; Ladd, 1983). These assortments increase the aggressive/rejected child's exposure to criminal models and to reinforcement for criminal activity, thereby accounting for the emergence of seriously deviant and criminal behavior (West and Farrington, 1973).

A conjunctive feedback model. More complex models of social development have been suggested that recognize these same stepping-stones, but in a different course. Such models assume the operation of conjunctive feedback loops in the development of social adaptation that involve both family and peer socialization. To illustrate this kind of thinking, we draw from the recent work of Gerald Patterson and

John Reid, whose empirical studies of aggressive and anti-social boys embrace many more of the individual links in the causal chain than other studies do.

To describe these conjunctive feedback models, we need to expand our discussion in several ways: First, we need to consider briefly what constitutes 'underlying disturbance,' or what might be considered the 'precursors' of both aggressiveness and peer difficulties. In this regard, the synergistic relation between family and peer socialization needs recognition. Second, we need to consider the implications of social rejection for the child in somewhat greater detail than we have thus far.

Secure attachments between the young child and its caregivers promote exploration of the environment, including the other children who inhabit it. Mothers arrange contacts between their young children and other youngsters, believing this to be desirable, and securely attached children are more likely to have such mothers than are insecurely attached ones (Lieberman, 1976). We know that secure attachments in the first two years are likely to produce the individuation and self-esteem, as well as the other social skills, required for early success in peer relations. There is now substantial evidence that secure early attachments are predictive of effectiveness in peer relations during the preschool years. Insecure attachments foster difficulties with impulse controls and negative peer interactions in the period between four and six (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986).

Other studies show that children who are 'at risk' in these ways undergo basic training for anti-social behaviors in the home. Patterson and his associates (Patterson & Bank, 1988) have described

this training in many different studies, each based on extensive home observations. Extending from toddlerhood, this training involves unusually high frequencies of coercive transactions between parent and child. Both individuals are inept in controlling the behavior of the other as revealed by the high frequencies with which one is likely to start an aversive exchange, respond negatively when the other person has just behaved negatively, and continue acting negatively once an exchange has started. Families at risk for aggressive pathology use negative reinforcement that actually accelerates and sustains these coercive cycles so that the child's home constitutes an aggressive training ground, whatever else it comprises. Moreover, the results indicate that these modes of interaction characterize both parent-child and sibling interaction to a greater extent in families with 'problem children' than in non-problem families. Problem families are also characterized by poor parent monitoring, parent-child relationships that are essentially rejecting, and deficient prosocial socialization. The problem child is not taught how to relate positively to either adults or to peers; how to work; or to accept responsibility for both giving and receiving.

The origins of these processes have not been clearly identified, but the relevant studies suggest that individual differences in parents are not entirely responsible. First, the relationships and interactions that are associated with risk for anti-social behavior do not extend across all children in a family. Second, the histories of the children at risk show that they were 'difficult to socialize' from very early in childhood (Patterson, 1982). Thus, one toddler may be more difficult to handle than his siblings, possibly on heritable

bases. But the developmental course is clearly an interactive one between these early dispositions (which only account for a small amount of variance) and the coercive cycles mentioned. The important issue is that some children seem to be difficult to socialize from the very beginning and it is difficult to attribute these differences entirely to the environment.

The conjunctive feedback model posits both direct and indirect contributions of these early differences to later deviance, i.e., some causal influences extend <u>through</u> peer interaction and others don't. First, the model assumes that social failure is more likely to be met by children with histories of insecure attachments and coercive family socialization than other children. The children are impulsive, mean, and disruptive in their early interactions with other children; other children immediately dislike and avoid them. Over time, these transactions limit the child's opportunities for constructive learning within child-child relations (as described above) and establish continuing cycles of rejection and self-deprecation. Moreover, these failures set limits on the opportunities the children have for further socialization. That is, failure successively limits the other children with whom a child can interact and these limitations enhance the likelihood that the child will remain fixed in the antisocial process, thereby being at even greater risk for antisocial behavior in the future.

According to this way of thinking, children go on to select associates who provide <u>rough matches</u> for both their own social skills. This 'shopping for social opportunities' (Patterson & Bank, 1988) presumably is transactional -- i.e., the child selects associates who are similar to him or herself, and similar associates select the child

so that, over time, peer groups become relatively homogeneous in terms of activities, values, and interests. Via these processes, the associates of the anti-social child slip further and further to the extremes in terms of both their social incompetence and their anti-social proclivities. And these extremes are likely to involve ineptitude across a variety of domains, including athletic skills as well as the social graces.

The shopping hypothesis remains conjectural but it fits many of the data we have at hand (Kandel, 1978; Cairns et al., 1988). Moreover, it implies that it is rejection by normal peers that leads troublesome children to shop outside the ordinary range of child associates for support and stimulation, leading eventually to their discovery (or selection) by a group of deviant peers. Usually occurring during preadolescence, the situation now becomes one in which rejected/aggressive children develop affiliations with other children who share their own anti-social, anti-school, and anti-authority attitudes. According to this developmental scenario, the road to deviance does not begin with associates who are themselves deviant; it is only the final stage on a road which begins with social failure and being disliked in early and middle childhood.

Family relations and peer relations function conjunctively in normal development as well as in the development of deviance. Parent-child relations, especially the mother-child relationship, produce an emotional and instrumental base from which the young child can explore the wider social world -- successfully or unsuccessfully, as the case may be. These explorations bring the child into contact with other children, and through interaction with them, the child extends his/her

competencies in communication, role-taking, and cooperation. Parents also exercise managerial functions: they monitor their children's behavior and determine, in early and middle childhood, the timing and circumstances under which their offspring will have contact with other children. These may be effective or ineffective, as the case may be. Within the peer culture assortative processes occur. Being liked and being disliked by other children helps to set children on different developmental pathways with different probabilities that successful outcomes will occur. Over time, parent-child and peer relations both continue to feed into this system, making it extremely difficult to describe the dialectics involving the child and these two social worlds. Based on studies of family disruption, however, it is safe to conclude that neither family relations nor peer relations constitute 'closed systems' in childhood socialization at any time -- whether at age four, six, or ten.

Although no one has been able to include all the necessary events in a single, comprehensive investigation that would serve to test the conjunctive feedback model, it fits the existing data surprisingly well. Simpler, direct models of social deviance or models suggesting that peer difficulties are merely 'by-products' of more fundamental maladaptations in the child's development are less and less appealing. At the same time, multivariate studies are carrying us closer and closer to comprehensive verification of some kind of conjunctive model of social development. Thus, it is this way of thinking that probably should inform the work of practitioners in the field of early development and education.

Conclusion

Good peer relations are developmental forerunners of good

adaptations in later life. The evidence suggests that child-child relations serve as contexts for the acquisition of social skills, as cognitive and emotional resources, and as models to be used in forming other relationships. Peer relations, however, combine developmentally with family relations in determining whether or not the child is 'at risk' in socioemotional development. Troubled family relations are likely to be followed by troubled peer relations, problems with self-regard, and narrowed alternatives in choosing friends. Current studies suggest that, unfortunately, this cycling may begin in early childhood. Awareness of these developmental dynamics is necessary in designing and implementing numerous early childhood programs.

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